

Historicist: Warrendale, a Mental Health Treatment Centre for Children

An experimental treatment centre for children in 1960s Etobicoke, and the award-winning documentary the CBC wouldn't air.

BY DAVID WENCER



Children outside Warrendale. Screenshot from the documentary *Warrendale*, directed by Allan King, 1967.

In December of 1965, staff and children moved into a new, long-term mental-health treatment centre at the end of a cul-de-sac near Kipling Avenue and Albion Road. This was the new home for Warrendale, an experimental and controversial treatment centre for emotionally disturbed children, which had previously been centred north of metropolitan Toronto, in [Oak Ridges](#). Over the next few months, Warrendale would face a complicated power struggle, the resignation of its entire staff, and [an award-winning documentary](#) which the CBC refused to broadcast.

Warrendale's origins lay in **St. Faith's Lodge**, initially established as an Anglican charity for girls. After several decades, St. Faith's Lodge underwent a radical change in 1952, when it established a centre called "Warrendale" and redirected its focus toward providing long-term, residential treatment for emotionally disturbed youth.

In 1953, the board hired a new executive director, **John Brown**, an American-born social worker whose name would soon become synonymous with Warrendale. Over the next decade, Brown developed an approach for the care of disturbed children and helped expand Warrendale's facilities to include a variety of centres and sites. By the early 1960s, Brown had established a new—and frequently contentious—model for treatment that was in place at all the centres he was affiliated with.

Warrendale facilities were residential centres, where children lived in groups of eight to 12. Each residential group had several staff members, the team leader of which reported regularly to Brown. Brown's model called for children to live together in an environment designed to emulate that of a family. Strong, familiar relationships were encouraged between the children and the staff, Brown telling the *Star* that "we actually provide parenting for the child to make up the lack of mothering and fathering he [or she] missed the first time around."



Warrendale reaches the unreachable

The Warrendale centre at Oak Ridges. *The Toronto Star*, December 15, 1965.

In 1965, 44 children were temporarily housed in two cottages at **Sunnybrook Hospital**, waiting to move into the new Etobicoke site. That autumn, journalist Sheila H. Kieran visited this

temporary Warrendale location, and described her observations in a *Maclean's* feature the following February, helping to bring Brown and his methods to national attention.

Kieran writes that "Warrendale's supervisory people are trained social workers or psychologists but, surprisingly, the child care staff get most of their training on the job and through personal psychotherapy." The novelty of this kind of work, coupled with the desire for a large number of workers, resulted in a large number of staffing positions which often proved difficult to fill. The staff was generally young; a *Telegram* article from August 1966 notes the average staff age at Warrendale was 24. One classified ad in the *Toronto Star* that same month reads: "University degree preferred. Experience not necessary. Training program offered." In her article, Kieran notes that Warrendale was planning to expand its training program, and that "with today's problems of inadequate staff in all fields of mental health, this solution strikes me as full of promise."

The children at Warrendale were generally between the ages of nine and 17, and arrived with a variety of individual problems. Brown told the *Star* in 1965 that "we get the type of child that has been classed as 'unreachable.' They've gone through hospitals, clinics, been 'case-worked' to death. Our methods have to be unorthodox because orthodox treatments have failed with these children."

Television producer **Patrick Watson**, who was involved in a documentary on the Etobicoke Warrendale facility, writes that "the children who live at Warrendale are people whose lives have gone off the track... Eventually, their paths diverged so far from the normal that it became impossible for them to live in a normal family or a normal community. Their fear, their rages, their withdrawal had become so extreme that parents and teachers and friends could no longer contact them, and they were lost."

As part of Brown's approach to creating a family-like atmosphere, physical contact played a significant role at Warrendale. "As you see children and the care workers moving about this house," he told the *Star*, "you will notice a lot of hugging between them and bodily contact. We over-emphasize certain areas of giving like this because these children have been starved in these areas."

This emphasis on physical contact was part of a larger idea of "retrogression" therapy. Kieran's *Maclean's* article notes that a child at Warrendale has "missed out on vital emotional experiences" in their development, "and remains, whatever his apparent age, still an uncivilized infant. On this basis, children at Warrendale are taken back to re-experience their infancy, this time with loving, giving, substitute parents [the child care staff]. If, in the opinion of the staff, a youngster needs a baby bottle, he is given one, no matter what his age. The children, even the teenagers, are cuddled frequently, tucked into bed, bathed, and sometimes fed."

Another chief component of the Warrendale treatment program was the “holding” technique, in which a child who becomes hysterical or violent is physically held by staff, as opposed to subjected to straight jackets or sedatives. Within a “holding” session, it is believed that the child is able to vent frustrations and fears, without fear of injury to themselves or others.



A child and two staff involved in a holding session. Screenshot from the documentary *Warrendale*, directed by Allan King, 1967.

Between the bottle-feeding and the emphasis on physical touching, it could be easy for Warrendale to become the subject of rumours. Kiernan writes, “I looked in vain for teenagers being cuddled suggestively by adult workers. Instead, I found, for the most part, that a substantial amount of physical contact comes in casual ways... all of it casual and appropriate enough to withstand scrutiny by the most priggish Mrs. Grundy.”

The new facility in Etobicoke opened on December 14, 1965 with four residences, an office, and a school building, with two additional residences under construction. Speaking at its opening, Ontario Welfare Minister **Louis Cecile** said, “We have been impressed by the results of the Warrendale program. You have a high rate of success in treatment so that you must have

developed remarkably effective techniques in dealing with that elusive and complex entity—the mind of a child.”

Despite the hope surrounding the new facility, things began to unravel for John Brown and Warrendale the following summer.

Brown became involved in an ongoing public debate over the state of mental health in Ontario, particularly over the matter of Ontario children who were found to be receiving psychiatric care in institutions designed for adults. This debate soon became charged with politics, as prominent NDP figures including **Stephen Lewis** advocated for changes to the existing system, meeting opposition from various figures in the reigning Conservative government and some members of the medical establishment. In June of 1966, in **the same election** that saw **radical Toronto coroner Morton Shulman** enter provincial politics as an NDP candidate for High Park, Brown was announced as the NDP candidate for the provincial riding of Beaches-Woodbine.

Suddenly, on August 10, John Brown announced he would be leaving Warrendale, effective September 1. Brown accused the Ontario Department of Welfare of forcing him out by putting pressure on Warrendale’s board of directors. He hurled a series of accusations, mostly at the Department of Welfare, claiming they wanted to interfere with his program and limit its ability to provide care. He further alleged that the government was targeting him, specifically, due to his affiliation with the NDP.



Warrendale Court. Screenshot from the documentary *Warrendale*, directed by Allan King, 1967.

The director of Child Welfare for the province, Betty Graham, denied that there was any such interference and accused Brown of having a “persecution complex.” Ontario Welfare Minister Louis Cecile, who had spoken in praise of Warrendale just six months earlier, now told the press he no longer believed in Brown’s work, quoted in the *Star* as saying “most psychologists I’ve met do not approve of his methods.” Brown vigorously defended his treatment methods, and maintained that he was being dismissed because of his political affiliations, claiming that there were Conservative candidates in parallel situations who had not been forced to resign their posts.

As the dispute raged on, Brown set up his own company, Brown Camps, Ltd., at Oak Ridges, with plans to carry on his work there. His affiliation with Warrendale would cease on September 1, when acting director Robert Henry would assume control. The remaining staff at Warrendale planned to carry on without John Brown.

This plan was cast athwart when Henry resigned on August 24, claiming he was unable to reach an agreement with the board of directors over continuing Brown's treatment program, and writing that "the board has lost focus on the treatment of children." The next day, all 40 staff members of Warrendale announced their resignations, citing a lack of positive leadership, and announced a plan to relocate all the children currently at the Etobicoke centre to Brown's private camp at Oak Ridges. "If necessary," staff director Walter Gunn told the *Telegram*, "we will hire tents and set up a camp until the end of September so we can help these children."



—Star photo by Boris Spremo

JOHN BROWN, CENTRE OF CONTROVERSY
'We try to go back to that basic family method'

After an attempt at mediation failed, the Warrendale board sold the Etobicoke site to the Province of Ontario, who assumed responsibility for the facility. The old board would remain in place until a new administrative model could be established, and the new director would be **Dr. J. Donald Atcheson**, who was already the superintendent of the nearby, government-run **Thistletown Hospital**, an institution with a similar mandate to that of Warrendale.

Health Minister **Matthew Dymond** issued a statement to touch on several of the major issues. Dymond noted that Thistletown was then a more “medically oriented” institution than Warrendale, “but this doesn’t necessarily mean that Warrendale’s program will now become medically oriented.” Each child would be individually reassessed, and staff would be instructed to consider “all types of treatment with a completely open mind.” He also noted that “parents of children who are at present patients at Warrendale can be assured that the transfer will be accomplished with as little disruption as possible.” The transfer proved to be extremely disruptive.

(Above right: John Brown. The Toronto Star, September 10, 1966. Photo by Boris Spremo.)

The next day, all three Toronto newspapers reported that groups of children had fled Warrendale during the night, some on their own, others reportedly with the aid of former Warrendale staff. Twelve children were reportedly picked up in a station wagon by a former staffer. Several children reportedly slipped away on their own and hitchhiked to Brown’s centre in Oak Ridges; one reportedly walked the entire way. According to Brown, several of the youths called him during the night, asking for protection. Case worker Vicki Hollenberg told the *Star* she received a phone call from two girls who had run away, asking to be picked up. After contacting two Children’s Aid societies and getting permission to transport them to Brown’s new camp in Oak Ridges, provincial officials raided Hollenberg’s home at 4 a.m. and took them back to Warrendale.

Over the next few days, reports continued of children escaping from Warrendale. In the *Telegram*, “workers and parents charged the new staff is lax, unable to control the children and using out-of-date methods, including solitary confinement.” A former Warrendale social worker was paraphrased in the same article, indicating that the new staff was incapable of working in the Warrendale setting, and noted that “they can’t work with children unless there are bars and locked doors.”

Following this disastrous transition, many parents preferred to relocate their children to Brown’s private facility in Oak Ridges. One parent told the *Telegram*, “In Thistletown, long-term treatment is not given, and that is my concern. My son has only a slim chance of accepting life again. And for this reason I must ignore bribes of free service under the Provincial hospital plan, and go to Brown camp.” According to **one source**, 52 of the 57 children who had been at Warrendale at the time of the government takeover were back under Brown’s care within a year.



Over the next few months, the uneasy transition at the Etobicoke site went on. Brown continued to have a public dispute with various departments of the Ontario government, both over the veracity of his methods and the finances of Warrendale.

During the dispute, the *Star's* Marilyn Dunlop wrote an article foreshadowing what would soon become the general public's primary window into the world of Warrendale: the memories of documentary filmmaker [Allan King](#), who had spent considerable time in the Etobicoke centre in the spring of 1966.

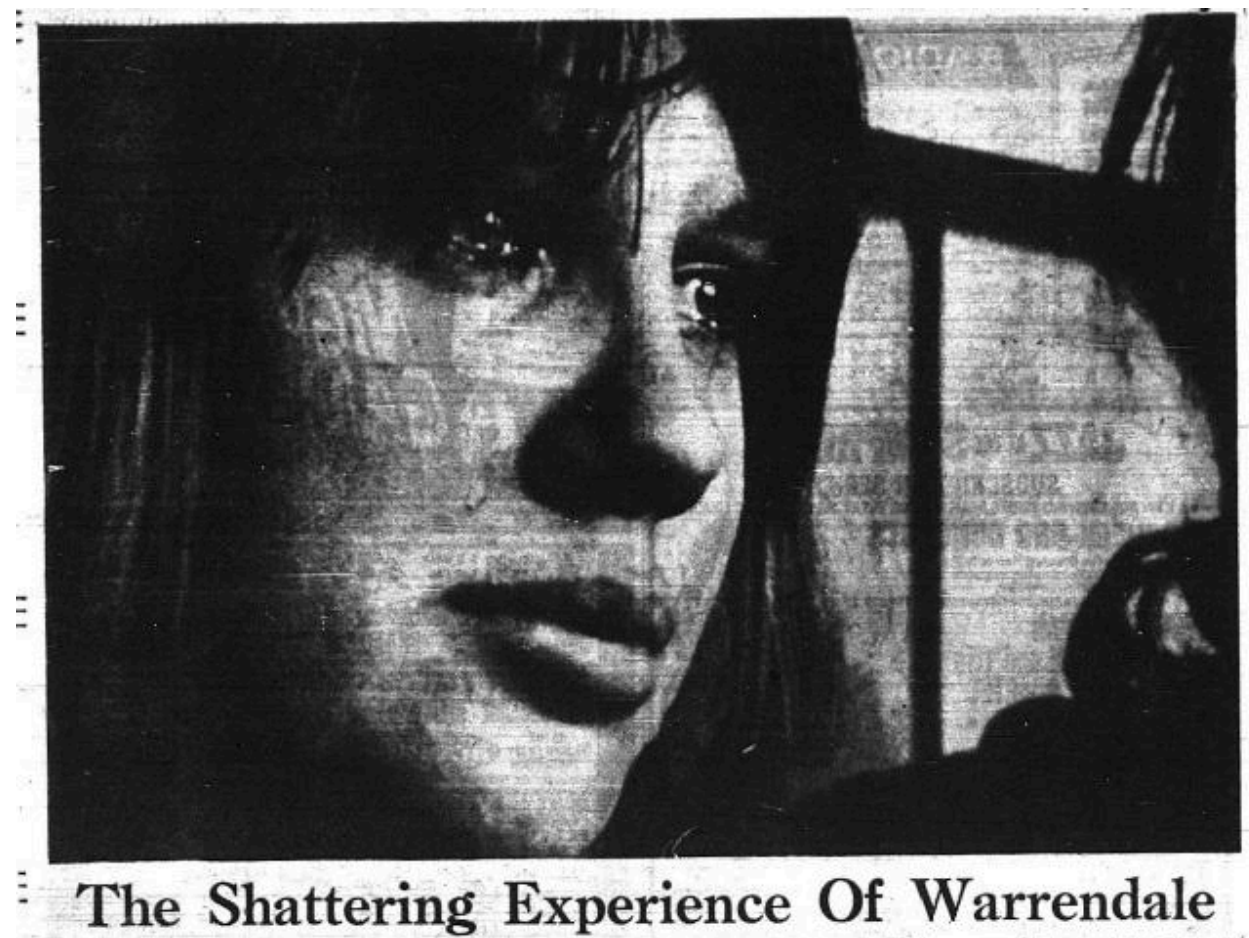
(Above left: John Brown. The Telegram, September 19, 1966. Photo by Boris Spremo.)

Following some initial conversations with John Brown, King began visiting Warrendale regularly, getting to know the staff and children, eventually spending close to a month on site before bringing in the rest of the crew and any equipment. In a subsequent interview, King stressed his preliminary meetings with the children, saying "it was essential to obtain their full consent. Before they would agree, they wanted to know why we wanted to make the film and what other people would think of them." According to Dunlop's article, "King said he told them he wanted to record their daily lives because their feelings were important and their difficulties were problems shared to some degree by all society."

After receiving consent to film from the children and staff, King and his crew spent several weeks filming inside one of the Warrendale residences, collecting footage in preparation for a

CBC documentary on Warrendale, recording everyday activities, ranging from typical games and interactions to holding sessions and bottle-feeding.

The resulting film, simply titled *Warrendale*, presents life inside Warrendale with little additional context. No introduction or narration is provided, and the audience is given no initial explanation as to what Warrendale is, or of the specific problems affecting the children, or of the roles of the staff. Scenes of bottle-feeding are included, as are scenes of children sitting on the laps of workers. Several holding sessions are shown. These aspects of Brown's methods are interspersed with footage of children and staff playing, eating meals together, and watching hockey on television. The climax of the film comes with the staff breaking the news of the sudden death of Dorothy, the cook, resulting in an exhausting episode in which several children experience violent emotional outbursts.



The Shattering Experience Of Warrendale

Headline and photo from a review of *Warrendale*. *The Telegram*, June 3, 1967.

By April 1967, however, the CBC had yet to air the completed documentary. Given the nature of the treatment centre and the emotionally charged accusations from the previous summer, the CBC's reluctance to air the film seemed understandable. Roy Shields raised several questions in the *Star's* television column. "With scenes of screaming, hysterical children being held by staff workers, with other scenes of children experiencing regression to bottle-feeding, will unprepared viewers understand or be outraged?... Considering the current political and medical controversy over John Brown's methods of treatment, does the film argue for or against him? And if so, is it fair?" Ultimately, though, what kept CBC from airing the film was the word "fuck."

Allan King revealed that what caused the CBC to balk were, in the words of Roy Shields, "scenes of children in wild fits of rage, cursing their fates while being held in check by Warrendale social workers." CBC executives agreed that the film was excellent, but in a statement released to the press, stated that "certain sequences would violate the broadcast regulations... Following discussion with the producer, it has been found impractical to delete from the film the sequences which would be in violation of the regulations." By this time *Warrendale* had already been sent to New York, London, and Paris, and had been accepted for entry at the Cannes Film Festival. Shields predicted "there is the fear that only after it has been accepted abroad will it be deemed fit for home consumption. Politics aside, that's what really hurts—that on our own, we haven't the guts to show or see this film."

As a film, *Warrendale* proved to be immensely successful, winning the Art and Experiment Prize at Cannes, and garnering enthusiastic reviews.

On the night of its Toronto debut in June 1967, Allan King held a premiere party at *Casa Loma*, the proceeds of which were donated to the Ontario Association for Emotionally Disturbed Children, attended by people involved with the film's production, along with other local luminaries including *Dalton Camp* and *Bruno Gerussi*. The *Telegram* noted that this was not a typical film party, probably "because the film about emotionally disturbed children simply didn't lend itself to gala festivities."



The party at Casa Loma, following the Toronto premiere of *Warrendale*. The man at the far right is the film's executive producer, Patrick Watson. *The Telegram*, June 7, 1967.

All three Toronto dailies ran effusively positive reviews of *Warrendale*. The *Globe's* **Ralph Hicklin** wrote, "King and his associates have taken a real and difficult situation, and dehydrated it into a concentrate that retains all the truth and anguish and love and hate of five weeks in the lives of a handful of struggling children." **Clyde Gilmour** in the *Telegram* described it as "a total-experience film that rips at your guts and unlocks your compassion and makes you re-examine your own assessments of yourself and the people who surround you." In the *Star*, **Margaret Weiers** described it as "a film every parent should see."

Although only brought to Toronto for a two-week run at the New Yorker Theatre (now the home of the **Panasonic**), *Warrendale* proved so popular with the public that it was held over multiple times, playing for a total of nine weeks. For those who had read about *Warrendale* and its troubles over the past few years, this was the first and only opportunity to see for themselves the staff, children, and treatment used at John Brown's *Warrendale*, which no longer existed in the form seen on screen.

Warrendale Court remains in Northern Etobicoke today; most of the buildings from John Brown's time are still standing. John Brown **won his riding** in the election of 1967, but chose not to seek re-election in 1971. Following his death in 2004, the Ontario Legislature **devoted time to acknowledge his contributions**. **Jim Bradley**, speaking of Brown, praised Brown's work and his willingness to take on difficult cases. "John Brown and his group were prepared to take on the most difficult. He had a revolutionary approach to children's mental health... He took great strides both before and after his election to communicate the need for the Ministry of Health to

invest in children's mental health facilities, and that cry is with us today, as it has been for a long time."

Additional material from: Browndale.net; Karen Gilmour-Barrett and Susan Pratt, A New Profession; The Globe and Mail, December 9, December 15, 1965, April 7, June 2, June 3, June 4, July 21, August 10, August 11, August 12, August 13, August 17, August 25, August 26, September 2, September 3, September 8, September 9, September 10, September 12, September 13, September 15, September 19, October 1, October 25, October 27, 1966; March 27, April 18, June 3, October 18, December 30, 1967, June 15, 2009; King, (Allan) Associates, Warrendale (Produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1967); Maclean's, February 19, December 17, 1967; The Toronto Star, December 15, 1965, February 9, April 30, June 2, June 30, August 10, August 12, August 16, August 24, August 25, August 26, August 27, August 31, September 8, September 9, September 10, September 12, September 13, September 14, September 15, September 19, September 30, November 5, 1966, January 24, February 3, February 16, March 25, April 6, April 18, May 8, May 13, May 24, June 3, July 1, July 7, August 14, October 18, 1967; The Telegram, June 2, August 10, August 11, August 25, September 8, September 9, September 13, 1966, June 3, June 7, 1967.

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